

6-1-1957

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William J. Petersen

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Recommended Citation

Petersen, William J. "Massacre on the Okobojis." *The Palimpsest* 38 (1957), 221-235.
Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol38/iss6/3>

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Massacre on the Okobojis

Several remote and immediate causes led up to the Spirit Lake Massacre. First of all, a burning hatred for the white man's way of life had smouldered in the red man's breast since the founding of Jamestown in 1607 — exactly 250 years before the Spirit Lake Massacre. Secondly, the futile efforts of the Indian to arrest the westward surge of the pioneers is graphically revealed by Indian treaties, the most recent of which had ceded land in northern Iowa and adjacent Minnesota as late as 1851. Thirdly, unscrupulous white traders constantly preyed on the red man, causing bitter resentment. Fourthly, unprincipled whiskey runners were responsible for the physical, spiritual, and moral degradation of the red man. The situation was not alleviated by the Indian's laziness and improvident way of life. Although the American settler was rarely guilty of any of the above infractions, he was detested because cultivation of the soil meant the gradual disappearance of the Indians' hunting ground. The pioneers, on the other hand, were well aware of the Indians' proclivity to beg, steal, or take by force; their cunning and treachery was attested by lurid tales of burned log cabins, ravaged settlements, scalped

and mutilated victims, and captive women — a truly sordid story stretching over two centuries of time.

In addition to the above, there were several causes which led immediately to the Spirit Lake Massacre . . . an extremely bitter winter, the depraved character of Inkpaduta and his renegade Sioux followers, incidents around Smithland in Woodbury County, and the vulnerability of the isolated settlers in the Okoboji-Spirit Lake area. Let Abbie Gardner tell her own story:

The winter of 1856-7 was one ever to be remembered by the people of Iowa and Minnesota for its bitter cold weather, deep snow, and violent storms, rendering communication between the different settlements almost impossible. Of course the settlers were illy prepared for any winter, and much less for such a one as this; for it must be remembered there was no lumber to be had within a hundred miles, and all the provisions, of every kind, except what might be captured from the lakes and groves, had to be brought a like distance. Some cabins were yet without floors; the doors were made of puncheons, hung on wooden hinges, and fastened with wooden latches. Our floor was made comfortable by leveling off the ground and covering it with prairie hay, over which a rag carpet was spread, which had been brought all the way from the state of New York. . . .

In February, Mr. Luce and Mr. Thatcher started, with an ox-team and sled, to obtain provisions for their families. In spite of snow-banks, sometimes fifteen and twenty feet deep, in spite of wind and cold they reached Hampton, Shell Rock, Cedar Falls and Waterloo. They secured as large a supply as they thought possible to convey, with

their weary oxen, over the untrodden drifts, and succeeded in making their way back as far as Shippey's cabin, in Palo Alto county, about ten miles below Emmetsburg, on the Des Moines river. Here it was decided that Mr. Thatcher should remain to recruit the oxen, while Mr. Luce proceeded home, accompanied by three young men, who were making their first visit to the lakes. . . . Little did they imagine they were going to meet such a cruel death. By this delay of Mr. Thatcher he escaped the terrible fate of the doomed colony at the lakes.

During this same period, Inkpaduta, a renegade Wakpekutis Indian chief, had assumed the leadership of Wamdisappa's band which numbered anywhere from fifty to one hundred and fifty men, women, and children. According to Charles E. Flandrau, United States Indian Agent for the Sioux, the name Inkpaduta meant "Scarlet Point," but sometimes was translated "Red End." Inkpaduta and his band were considered a "bad lot of vagabonds" who caused a "great deal of trouble" to red men and white men alike. For killing the chief of the Wakpekuti, Inkpaduta had been outlawed by the band. As a result he roamed far and wide in the Big Sioux Valley and adjoining country. During the hard winter of 1856-1857, Inkpaduta and his followers probably suffered just as much as his more peaceable brethren.

Abbie Gardner was destined, as a captive of the Sioux, to become well-acquainted with the personality and character of Inkpaduta.

He supported himself by hunting and plunder; leading

a wandering, marauding life, the number of his followers varying from time to time from fifty to one hundred and fifty, as individuals of similar character, from different bands of Sioux, joined or deserted him.

. . . As I remember Inkpaduta, he was probably fifty or sixty years of age, about six feet in height, and strongly built. He was deeply pitted by smallpox, giving him a revolting appearance, and distinguishing him from the rest of the band. His family, consisted of himself and squaw, four sons, and one daughter. His natural enmity to the white man; his desperately bold and revengeful disposition; his hatred of his enemies, even of his own race; his matchless success on the war-path, won for him honor from his people, distinguished him as a hero, and made him a leader of his race.

By the whites — especially those who have escaped the scenes of his brutal carnage, to wear, within, the garb of deepest mourning, from the severing of social, parental and filial ties — Inkpaduta will ever be remembered as a savage monster in human shape, fitted only for the darkest corner in Hades. . . .

In the autumn of 1856, Inkpaduta's band went down to the lower valley of the Little Sioux, where the first trouble with the whites began in the vicinity of Smithland. Several aggressions by the Indians and violent repulses by the whites are given, as preceding the incidents, generally accepted by both Indians and whites, as the immediate cause of the fatal catastrophe.

It seems, that one day, while the Indians were in pursuit of elk, they had some difficulty with the settlers. The Indians claimed that the whites intercepted the chase. There is also a report that an Indian was bitten by a dog belonging to one of the settlers; that the Indian killed the dog; and that the man gave the Indian a severe beating. It is also said that the settlers whipped off a company of

squaws, who were carrying off their hay and corn. The Indians becoming more and more insolent, the settlers, in self-protection, went to the camp and disarmed them, intending to return their guns the next day and escort them out of the country; but the next morning not a "redskin" was to be seen, they had folded their tents, "like the Arabs," and as silently stolen away. They went up the Little Sioux, their hearts filled with revenge, and committed depredations as they went. At first they pretended to be friendly, but soon commenced depredations, forcibly taking guns, ammunition, provisions, and whatever they wanted. They also amused themselves by discharging their guns through articles of furniture, ripping open feather beds and scattering their contents through the yards. The farther they proceeded, the fewer and more defenseless the settlers were; and the bolder and more insolent the Indians became. After remaining a few days in Cherokee county, where they busied themselves with wantonly shooting cattle, hogs, and fowls, and destroying property generally; sometimes severely beating those who resisted, they proceeded up the Little Sioux, to the little settlement in Clay county, now called Peterson. Here they tarried two or three days, committing acts of atrocity as usual. . . .

Inkpaduta and his band reached the vicinity of Lake Okoboji on the evening of March 7th. The settlers had no knowledge of the presence of the embittered Sioux. Harvey Luce had reached home from his trip to Waterloo and Rowland Gardner had begun preparations for a trip to Fort Dodge for provisions on the morning of March 8.

As we were about to surround the table for breakfast, a solitary Indian entered the house, wearing the guise of

friendship and claiming the sacred prerogative of hospitality. A place was promptly prepared for him at the table, and he partook of the frugal meal with the family. This one was soon followed by others, until Inkpaduta and his fourteen warriors, with their squaws and papooses, had entered the house. They dissembled friendship, and the scanty store of the household was freely divided among them, until each was satisfied. They then became suddenly sullen, insolent, and overbearing, demanding ammunition and numerous other things. When father was giving one of them a few gun-caps, he snatched the whole box from his hand. At the same time another — as if by agreement — tried to get a powder-horn hanging against the wall; but was prevented by Mr. Luce, who now suspected that their intention was to get the ammunition, that we might not be able to defend ourselves. The Indian then drew his gun, and would have shot Mr. Luce, had the latter not promptly seized the gun pointed at his head.

About 9 a. m. Dr. Harriott and Mr. Snyder arrived with letters for Mr. Gardner to mail at Ft. Dodge. Rowland Gardner told them of the belligerent attitude of Inkpaduta and his band, who were still loitering in and around the cabin. Unfortunately, both Dr. Harriott and Mr. Snyder felt there was no danger, traded with them, and then returned to their own cabin, taking no precautions for their own safety. The Indians prowled around the Gardner cabin until noon when they left for the Mattock cabin, driving the Gardner cattle before them and shooting them on the way.

By this time stark terror reigned in the Gardner

cabin. All agreed the other settlers should be warned, but it was not until 2 p. m. that Harvey Luce and Mr. Clark set out. With prophetic sorrow, Mrs. Luce cried out: "Oh, Harvey! I am afraid you will never come back to me!" It proved to be their last parting.

About three o'clock the Gardners heard the report of guns in rapid succession from the Mattock cabin. As Abbie Gardner relates:

We were, then, no longer in doubt as to the awful reality that was hanging over us. Two long hours we passed in this fearful anxiety and suspense, waiting and watching, with conflicting hopes and fears, for Mr. Luce and Mr. Clark to return. At length, just as the sun was sinking behind the western horizon, shedding its brilliant rays over the snowy landscape, father, whose anxiety would no longer allow him to remain within doors, went out to reconnoiter. He, however, hastily returned, saying: "Nine Indians are coming, now only a short distance from the house, and we are all doomed to die." His first thought was to barricade the door and fight till the last, saying: "While they are killing all of us, I will kill a few of them, with the two loaded guns still left in the house." But to this mother protested, having not yet lost all faith in the savage monsters, and still hoping they would appreciate our kindness and spare our lives, she said: "If we have to die, let us die innocent of shedding blood."

Massacre at the Gardner Cabin

Alas, for the faith placed in these inhuman monsters! They entered the house and demanded more flour; and, as father turned to get them what remained of our scanty store, they shot him through the heart; he fell upon his right side and died without a struggle. When first the

Indian raised his gun to fire, mother or Mrs. Luce seized the gun and drew it down; but the other Indians instantly turned upon them, seized them by their arms, and beat them over the head with the butts of their guns; then dragged them out of doors, and killed them in the most cruel and shocking manner.

They then began an indiscriminate destruction of everything in the house; breaking open trunks and taking out clothing, cutting open feather-beds, and scattering the feathers everywhere. When the Indians entered the house, and during these awful scenes, I was seated in a chair, holding my sister's baby in my arms; her little boy on one side, and my little brother on the other, clinging to me in terror. They next seized the children; tearing them from me one by one, while they reached their little arms to me, crying piteously for protection that I was powerless to give. Heedless of their cries, they dragged them out of doors, and beat them to death with sticks of stove-wood.

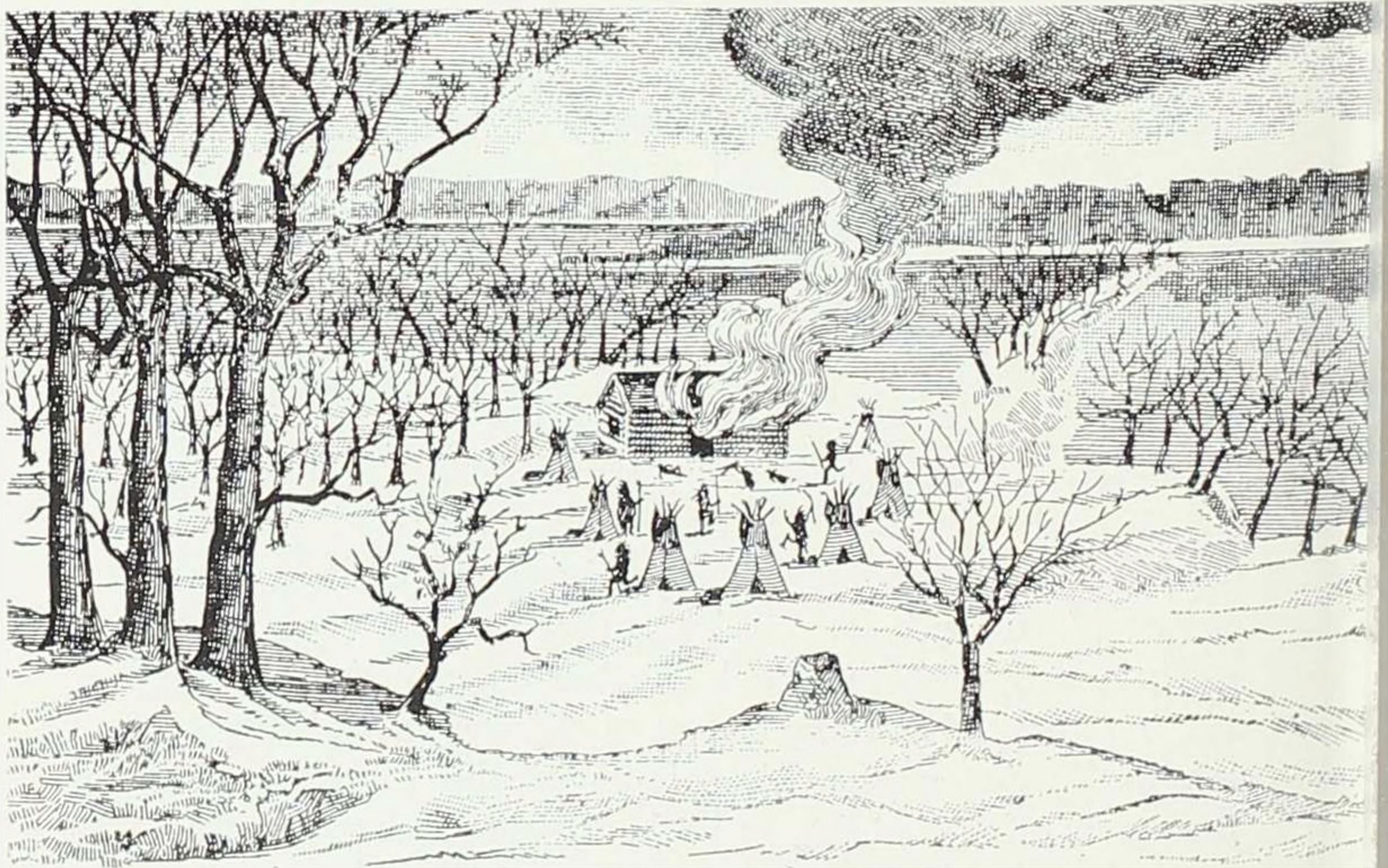
All this time I was both speechless and tearless; but, now left alone, I begged them to kill me. It seemed as though I could not wait for them to finish their work of death. One of them approached, and roughly seizing me by the arm said something I could not understand, but I well knew, from their actions, that I was to be a captive. All the terrible tortures and indignities I had ever read or heard of being inflicted upon their captives now arose in horrid vividness before me.

After ransacking the house, and taking whatever they thought might be serviceable, such as provisions, bedding, arms and ammunition; and after the bloody scalping knife had done its terrible work; I was dragged from the never-to-be-forgotten scene. No language can ever suggest, much less adequately portray, my feelings as I passed that door. . . . Behind me I left my heroic father, murdered in a cowardly manner, in the very act of extreme hospi-

tality . . . outside the door lay the three children — so dear to me — bruised, mangled, and bleeding; while their moans and groans pierced my ears, and called in vain for one loving caress which I was prevented from giving them. A little farther on lay my Christ-like mother, who till the very last had pleaded the cause of her brutish murderers, literally weltering in her own blood. Still farther on, at the southwest corner of the house, in a similar condition, lay my eldest sister, Mrs. Luce, who had been so intimately associated with me from earliest recollections. . . . Filled with loathing for these wretches whose hands were still wet with the blood of those dearest to me, and at one of whose belts still hung the dripping scalp of my mother; with even the much coveted boon of death denied me, we plunged into the gloom of the forest, and the coming night; but neither the gloom of the forest, nor the blackness of the night, or both combined, could begin to symbolize the darkness of my terror-stricken heart.

Massacre at the Mattock Cabin

Terrible as were the scenes through which I had just passed, others, if possible even yet more horrible, awaited me. A tramp of about one mile brought me to the camp of my captors, which was the home of Mr. Mattock. Here the sights and sounds that met the eye and ear were truly appalling. The forest was lighted by the camp-fires, and also by the burning of the cabins; and the air was rent with the unearthly war-whoop of the savages, and the shrieks and groans of two helpless victims, confined in the burning cabin, suffering all the agonies of a fiery death. Scattered upon the ground was a number of bodies, among which I recognized that of Dr. Harriott, rifle still in hand; as well as the bodies of Mr. Mattock, Mr. Snyder, and others, with rifles near them, some broken. All gave evidence that an attempt at resistance had been made.



Burning of the Mattock Cabin

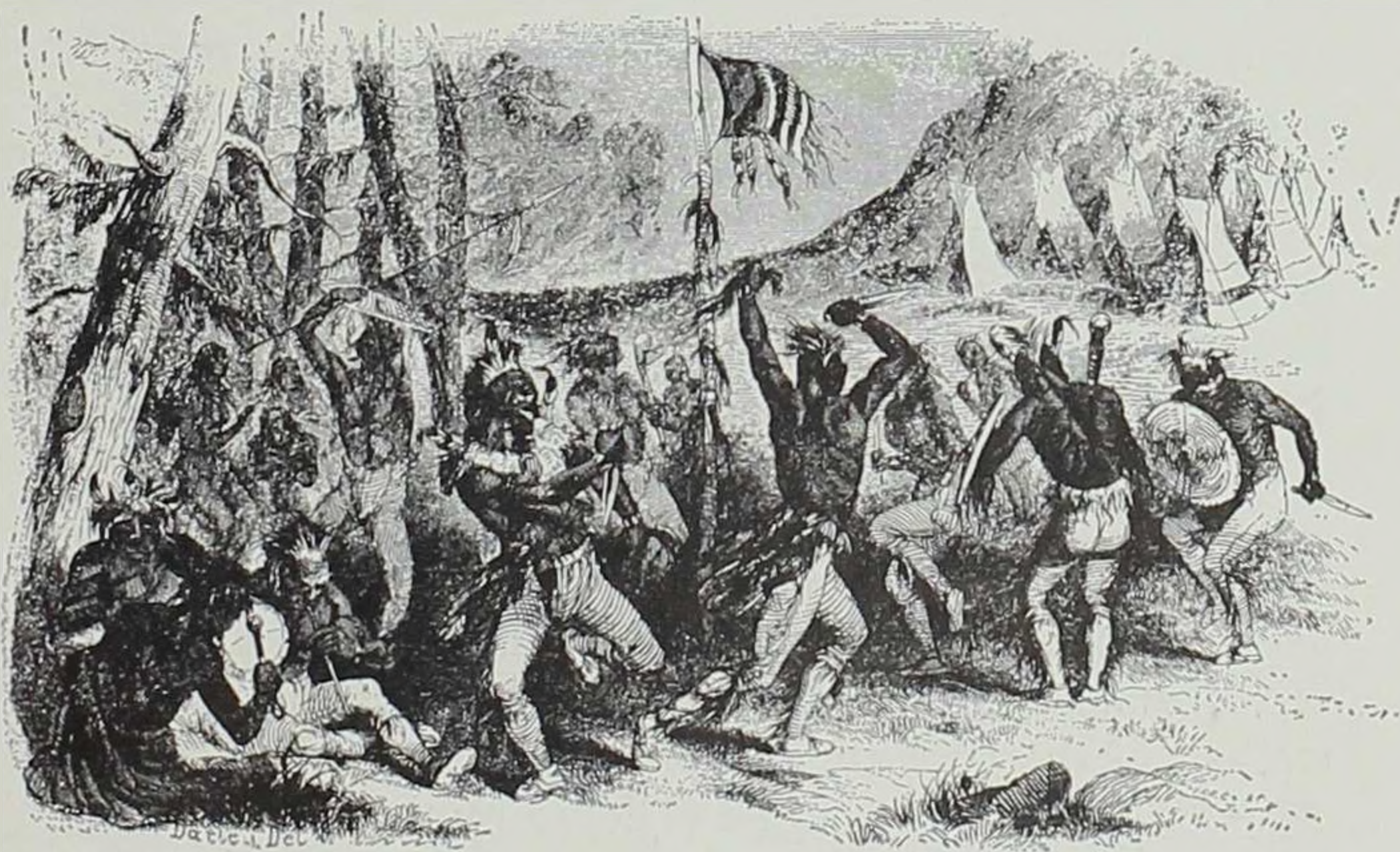
The air was rent with the unearthly war-whoop of the savages.

Carl Granger Decapitated

Dr. Harriott and Mr. Snyder, it seemed, had come across the strait from their home, to assist their neighbors. In all this affray not an Indian was killed, and only one wounded; but this one quite badly, and by Dr. Harriott, as the Indians told me. Here had perished five men, two women, and four children; and the bodies, save the two in the burning cabin, lay about the camp, their ghastly features clearly revealed by the light of the burning building; presenting a frightful scene beyond the power of my feeble pen to describe. Carl Granger's remains lay beside the Granger cabin. He had been first shot, and then his head chopped off above his mouth and ears, supposed to have been done with a broad-ax, found on the premises. Wm. Granger escaped the fate of his brother, being at home, at Red Wing, with his family.

The bodies of Harvey Luce and Mr. Clark were found near the outlet on the southern shore of East Okoboji. They apparently had been ambushed while attempting to reach the Howe and Thatcher cabins. The two men brought to twenty the number of victims massacred on March 8. After their hideous victory the exultant Sioux returned to their camp to celebrate with a war dance. The feelings of the fourteen-year-old captive are difficult to imagine:

Near the ghastly corpses, and over the blood-stained snow; with blackened faces, and fierce and uncouth gestures; and with wild screams and yells, they circled round and round, keeping time to the dullest, dreariest, sound of drum and rattle, until complete exhaustion compelled them to desist. . . . Amid such fearful scenes, I spent that



Sioux War Dance
With wild screams and yells, they circled round and round.

long, long, sleepless night — the first of my captivity, and the thoughts that fired my brain and oppressed my heart, can never be imagined, except by those who have suffered like pangs, and had them burned into their souls by a like experience.

The Howe Cabin

Morning came at last and with it more horrors. The Sioux thirst for blood was not satisfied as long as a single family remained on the lakes. Accordingly, early next morning the braves painted their faces black and started out on their work of slaughter. According to Abbie Gardner:

The Indians had gone but a short distance on East Okoboji when they met Mr. Howe, who was on his way to father's to borrow some flour. Him they shot, and severed his head from his body. . . . Thence they proceeded to the house of Mr. Howe, where they found his wife, his son Jonathan, his daughter Sardis, a young lady, and four younger children. They left only lifeless bodies, here, to tell the story of their bloody work.

From here they went to the cabin of Noble and Thatcher, where were two men and two women — Mr. and Mrs. Noble, Mr. Ryan, and Mrs. Thatcher, besides two children. With their usual cowardice and hypocrisy, the Indians feigned friendship until they had secured every advantage, so their own heads would be in no danger. Then, by concert of action, the two men were simultaneously shot. Ryan fell dead instantly. Mr. Noble cried, "O, I am killed!" After the fatal bullet struck him, he walked to the door though bleeding freely, and then fell dead. They next seized the children by the feet, dragging them from their mother's arms out of doors, and dashed their brains out against an oak tree which stood near the

house. They then plundered the house, appropriating to themselves whatever they wanted. After slaughtering the cattle, hogs, and poultry, they took the two women — Mrs. Noble and Mrs. Thatcher — captives and started back to their camp. On their way they again stopped at the house of Mr. Howe. Here a terrible spectacle met the gaze of the captives. Mrs. Noble found her mother lying dead under the bed, where she had doubtless crawled after being left by her brutal murderers. Her head was terribly beaten, probably with a flat-iron, as one lay near by bearing traces of the murderous work. Her eyes were protruding from the sockets, and, as Mrs. Noble described them, "looked like balls of fire." Her brother Jacob, some thirteen years old, who had been left for dead or dying, was found sitting up in the yard, and conscious, although unable to speak. To her questions he responded only with a nod or shake of the head. She told him, if the Indians did not come to him and finish the murder, to crawl into the house and get into one of the beds, and perhaps help would come and he might be saved; but the savages made sure of their work before they left, killing him before her eyes. The rest of the family lay scattered about the house and yard, all more or less mutilated.

After plundering and destroying the cabins, the Sioux returned to their camp with their captives and booty. Abbie Gardner was allowed to visit with the other two captives in order to allow the women a chance to recount their losses. Then they were taken to separate lodges and forced to braid their hair and paint their faces in the manner of squaws.

Oh, how I longed for death; and whenever they thought to torture me by threatening to take my life, I

would merely bow my head. My tearless acquiescence and willingness to die seemed to fill them with wonder, and even admiration, as they thought it a sign of great bravery, a quality they highly appreciate but which they did not suppose the white woman to possess. Soon after my capture, one of the warriors, who was sitting by me one day in the tent, thinking to test my courage or to be amused at my fears, took his revolver from his belt and began loading it, while he gave me to understand that he would kill me as soon as it was loaded. I merely bowed my head to signify that I was ready. When the revolver was all loaded he drew back the hammer and pointed it close to my head, but again I quietly bowed my head expecting he would do as he said; but instead of that he lowered the weapon, and looked at me as though astonished, and then laughed at me uproariously. So amused was he, indeed, that when others came into the *tepee* he would tell them the story, by signs and gestures, of how I had acted. Nor did it stop here, but for days after I could see that it was a favorite topic of conversation among them, and never again, except once by a squaw, was a weapon drawn upon me while I was a captive.

On March 10 the Sioux broke camp and crossed West Okoboji on the ice. The next day, at an early hour, they moved in a northerly direction to the west side of Spirit Lake. On March 13 they accidentally discovered the log cabin of William Marble. The Marbles were entirely unaware of the tragedy that had occurred on the Okobojis. It was therefore not difficult for the Sioux to completely disarm the Marbles of any suspicion.

Feigning friendship, they readily gained admission to the house; when, as usual, they asked for food. After

satisfying their hunger, they bantered him to trade rifles. After the trade was made, they proposed to shoot at a mark. A board was set up, and after firing several shots it was knocked down. Mr. Marble's gun being empty, they requested him to set it up. As soon as his back was turned, they shot him through the back, and he fell dead in his tracks. Mrs. Marble was sitting at the window, with palpitating heart, watching their actions; and as soon as she saw her husband start to replace the board, as if by instinct, she divined their murderous intentions. Seeing him fall, she rushed for the door, and would have fled for her life; but was quickly overtaken and conveyed to the camp. Thus, another unfortunate victim was added to our little band of helpless captives. We were all brought together in the same *tepee*; for what savage purpose we were at loss to know; unless it was that we might communicate to each other all their deeds of blood and plunder; for of these they were exceedingly proud, never losing an opportunity to recount them and glory in them. They carried away what they wanted from Mr. Marble's place, and destroyed what they could.

Another war dance followed the Sioux murder of Mr. Marble, the only white person killed on Spirit Lake, compared with thirty-seven lives snuffed out on the Okobojis. Notwithstanding this fact, the tragic event has always been called the Spirit Lake Massacre because at the time the whole lake region was known abroad as Spirit Lake, from the Indian word 'Minne-Waukon,' signifying spirit water.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN